

Michigan Adoption Day Press Conference
Tuesday, November 23, 2004, 8 am
Oakland County Courthouse
Remarks of Randall J. Wilger, Program Manager, Children's Community Support
Network

This morning I am delighted to be here to announce a new initiative of the Michigan Supreme Court, the creation of the Children's Community Support Network (CCSN). This Program is designed to engage the community in a collaborative effort to help create a nurturing environment where children, who are or were court wards, can grow up to become productive and responsible adults.

I think most of us would agree that even under the best of circumstances, living in our society today can be very challenging. But for children who have been abused or neglected by the very people who should have loved and protected them, the obstacles can become insurmountable. Children who come under the jurisdiction of the court often have dysfunctional role models if they have any at all. As a society, we have deluded ourselves into believing that children who can not live safely in their own homes are not our problem because there is a government system which takes care of their needs. In truth, the state is a very poor parent - the parent of last recourse. Many children who enter foster care move on to the juvenile justice system and eventually into the adult prison system. The cost to society is enormous.

More and more, we are beginning to understand that the Family Independence Agency and the courts cannot address all of the needs of the children who come into care. At any given time, almost nineteen thousand (19,000) children are in the care of the state as either temporary or permanent court wards. Of these, approximately four thousand five hundred (4,500) children are available for adoption, yet only a very small percentage of those children will be adopted. Statistically, the age of 11 seems to be the demarcation beyond which children are no longer adopted. Most of these children will remain in foster care until they "age out" of the system at 18 or 19 and find themselves trying to make their way in an adult world without a family or social support network. Without anyone to counsel or guide them, these young adults are forced to rely on their own judgment when making life decisions. Unfortunately, those decisions are not always wise, and within two years of aging out, over half of these youth find themselves in trouble with the law.

As the Chief Justice noted, we are convinced that there are many people of good will who would help if they only knew how. For that reason we surveyed child service organizations around the State of Michigan to determine how community volunteers could help to make a difference for foster children and young adults within their communities. The needs of these organizations are numerous and there are many ways that citizens willing to share their time and talent can help to make a difference. The goal of the Children's Community Support Network is to match volunteers with organizations in need of their assistance.

Mentors for children of all ages are needed but especially for those youth 16 and up who will age out of the system in a few years. Over half of the children in the system are males, yet we are told that very few men volunteer to serve in this capacity. For anyone who would consider serving as a mentor, no special experience is required.

Potential mentors will be screened and provided with training by the organization that is currently providing foster care services to these children and young adults.

Other areas of need are for pro bono services. People often think that only doctors, dentists, or lawyers can donate services. But we have identified needs for barbers, hair stylists, drivers, plumbers, painters, clothes sorters, as well as people who can teach arts and crafts, life skills, and hobbies such as golf, gardening or woodworking. The needs of these children are many and the opportunities for individuals to volunteer are limitless. Whatever skill a persons has, CCSN will match them with an organization that can use that skill to help make a difference in the life of a child. To obtain more information about volunteering, people can visit our website: www.courts.mi.gov/ccsn, they can e-mail us at ccsn@courts.mi.gov, or they can telephone me at (517) 373-5322. Having been a volunteer myself for twelve years I strongly encourage the adults of Michigan to become involved to make a positive difference in the lives of these, our children.
